

Mark 10:1-16 (NRSV)

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

When I saw the Gospel text for this week, I asked myself how I had been able to avoid preaching on this text in the time that I have been here, because the truth is, this is one of the very hard texts to preach on. In one way or another, many of us have been affected by divorce – we may have suffered through a divorce ourselves, or we may have suffered through the divorce of our parents, a sibling, a relation or a friend. And I use the term “suffered through” deliberately. A divorce is one of the hardest, one of the most stressful and miserable experiences a person can go through. And if we are

honest we look at this text and we worry, because Jesus is surely not putting his blessing on the dissolution of a marriage.

It is common, I suppose, to begin by pointing out what terrible trouble the institution of marriage is in, how many marriages end in divorce and other gloomy stuff. Let me not do that – let me begin, first, with some words in praise of marriage.

We can start with God’s insight in the reading from Genesis – it isn’t good for people to be alone. Now, what God does about that seems a little comical – he starts creating all kinds of animals of the field and birds of the air, cattle and oxen and finches and blue jays, and the man gets to name them all and say, “Nope, this is not a partner for me.” This goes on most of the day – rhinoceros, don’t even think about it! Platypus, yikes, what *is* that? – until Adam eventually uses up even God’s patience. And so God puts him in a deep sleep and creates for him, and for her, a partner, “flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone.”

And at its best, that is what marriage can be – a completion, a partnership, someone to love and to trust and to care for, someone, if we are blessed, to raise children and hopes and futures with. And as I look out at this congregation I see so many marriages of this sort. Not perfect, not astonishingly wonderful every moment, but marriages that represent a lot of the best that a pair of people, a family of people can be when they put away their selfishness and childishness and become truly present, truly loving to one another. Yes, sociologically, this union is not as common as we would hope, and Lord knows, the world we live in is not as supportive of this kind of union as we would hope, but we begin with the insight that God wasn’t wrong, and that Jesus isn’t wrong – it is not good for people to be alone and marriage and family can be a wonderful partnership.

Maybe that is enough background to see how Jesus and the Pharisees are talking past one another in today’s Gospel. As is

frequently the case, people come to Jesus asking about requirements, and he comes back telling them how to live rich, full, beautiful lives. They ask about how to pass the test – will this be on the final exam? – and he tells them about God’s dream for them. Whether it is divorce or healing people on the Sabbath or being a good neighbor or giving to God, people ask how they can get by, and Jesus doesn’t want you just to get by – Jesus wants you to live the life God intends for you, a loving, rich, generous life.

In this case, the answer is simple – God doesn’t intend for you to marry and divorce. God hopes that you’ll fall in love and create a durable partnership that becomes a family that is centered in God and in the good life God intends for you. Will it always happen? No, probably not. Lots of things will get in the way.

Many people will not be married, by choice or circumstance and live lives that are wonderful and pleasing to God. And many marriages will be less than ideal or will go through tough stretches. Because we bring all of our brokenness, all of our incompleteness, all of our flaws and failings to the marriage relationship, and on this side of the great feast, that means that we bring our sinful selves to God’s dream of relationship.

And so, we will sin and fall short, not just of the glory of God, but the expectations of our spouses and children and parents. Our expectations play such a large part in the inevitable disappointments of marriage. Sometimes our expectations are so unrealistic, they are beyond even God’s dream for our relationships. Our spouses should be mind-readers, infinitely patient, infinitely resourceful, creative, energetic and loving. And we are disappointed when they are not.

So, forgiveness, both giving and receiving forgiveness, needs to be a big part of any successful marriage. We need to be able to adjust our expectations, moderate our demands, rejoice in less than

complete success and forgive the inevitable disappointments we encounter.

But, back to the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees for a second. The other reason that Jesus doesn't want to answer the question the Pharisees ask is because he knows better than they do – no marriage is ever dissolved, it just gets a little bigger and more complicated. When two people marry, the two become one living organism, a family. When children come along, they are incorporated into this living family. When two people separate, the family doesn't dissolve – it still is a family even if the members might not all live in the same place. There are still joint decisions to make, clothes and food and shelter to secure, anger and frustration, but also communication and love. And when other people come along, like it or not, they become part of that family. And the family grows and grows. So, for the Pharisees to think that a certificate can make this all go away is simply ridiculous. What God has joined, no one *can* separate, even if they want to.

The reason that this is important is that sometimes we are like the Pharisees, and we want a “do-over” – we want our marriage to end and we want to go back to where we were before we were married, but that's just not possible. Good divorces – to the extent that there can be such a thing – good divorces recognize this, recognize that the family still exists and that mutual respect and consideration are still the basis for good decisions and good relationships.

I think that is why the reading goes on to talk about children. In any talk about families and divorce, God's concern always goes to the vulnerable, to those who cannot protect themselves, the children. In a world where God's will is done, children and their welfare is a prime concern, and when divorce and separation are being discussed the children and their welfare should certainly be the prime concern.

A final thought. The line just before today's Gospel reading begins gives us a bit of geography – Jesus is leaving Capernaum on the sea of Galilee to go down to Judea, down to Jerusalem, and he knows what awaits him there. I think this movement adds a particular urgency to Jesus' words here. He is going to his death and he wants to tell us about how to live. Don't you think it is odd that we think of Jesus as our judge, but he refuses to set meaningless requirements even though we keep asking for them? How can I get by? What's the least I can do? How can I limit who my neighbor is? What's the minimum I can give? Jesus refuses to say. This man who is going to his death understands how to live better than we do. This man who will shortly be a prisoner of the Romans, he is free, free to love, free to live generously and well. This man who is God knows how to be truly human.

Amen.